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SUBJECT: GREECE MOURNS ARCHBISHOP'S DEATH

REF: ATHENS 124

¶1. On January 31, Greece paid its final respects to Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Christodoulos in a funeral service at Athens' Metropolitan Cathedral. The service, lasting two hours and broadcast live on several television channels, was attended by a who's-who of Greek society, as well as representatives from Orthodox churches around the world - including Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I who presided at the funeral, representatives of other faiths, and members of the diplomatic corps. Ambassador Speckhard served as the U.S. Presidential Delegate. Many Greeks paused to watch; the streets were uncharacteristically empty during the service. After the service, Christodoulos' remains were transported to Athens First Cemetery by caisson, leading a procession of church leaders, government officials, and soldiers. The procession was also broadcast live, and the procession route was lined with tens of thousands of mourners.

¶2. Christodoulos' death and public reaction to it has further highlighted the Orthodox Church's prominent role in Greek society. Since his January 28 death, Greece has observed period of national mourning. On the day of the funeral, all public services and schools were closed, and much of the private sector followed suit. Throughout Greece, all flags have been flown at half-mast, and church bells have tolled slow laments. More than 28,000 people came to the Metropolitan Cathedral to pay their last respects during the three-day period of lying in repose, waiting for up to three hours in the uncharacteristically cold weather. Prior to his death, Christodoulos had a consistent approval rating of 75 percent, higher than any other public figure in Greece.

¶3. Discussion of successors has been subdued during the mourning period but will now become a prominent topic of public discussion. Early media speculation has highlighted the metropolitans of Sparta and Thebes as leading candidates, but the names of several other bishops have been tossed into the mix. Formal nomination of candidates will begin February 1, and under the rules of the Church, candidates must put their own names forward for consideration by the Holy Synod. The Ecumenical Patriarch, upon his arrival, quickly made it clear that he would not endorse a candidate or otherwise seek to influence the process. The Synod is scheduled to begin its deliberations on February 7.

SPECKHARD